

Growing Up Together in Jesus Christ

Ephesians 4:1-6, 15-16; Colossians 3:12-17

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Today I want to talk about community, our community of believers - our body here at SVBC. I want to talk about what that community looks like, what we are instructed about a community that is centred on Christ and built up into Christ with the Christ-like love that Pastor Tom spoke about last week.

I want to talk a little about what God's word says about his body and how we should show up with each other in that community.

I also want to talk about our heart as leaders, my heart as a leader - where I am at and some of what we see in our body at SVBC.

First and foremost, we are very excited by what God is doing in his local body here at SVBC. He has blessed the faithful stewardship of this body - stewardship of our time, talents and resources.

For more than 40 years this church has been serving the people of St. Albert, Edmonton, Alberta and the world. Many people have come to know the Lord, become his disciples, and are contributing to his kingdom work.

We have sent off missionaries God has raised up from this body, and we continue to do so as we look to support and send Tiffany off later this year.

We are increasing our support to missions and are looking increasingly at St. Albert and the changing needs in this community where we can come alongside partner ministries or organizations to make a difference in the lives of people in need - physically and spiritually.

We have a growing and dynamic children's ministry that is impacting the lives of our children and those in our community, with a chance to do more of that this summer with VBS and a deliberate outreach to kids within our community.

We have a community of believers who love and care for one another - who lift each other up in times of sickness or hurt, who support each other and are striving to do life together in a way that honors the Lord and demonstrates the love of Jesus Christ.

This has been the case for the entire life of this body and it is a wonderful testament to the character of the people in this body, to their love and concern for their brothers and sisters in Christ and their neighbours in St. Albert.

In short, we have some great things happening in our body and we should all be encouraged about what God is doing and can do in and through us.

That said, I don't think that it would come as a surprise to any of you if I acknowledged that there have been struggles along the way - we celebrated our 40th anniversary last Spring and revisited the good and the bad that make up the history that is this local body. We have a stone at the corner of the property to remind of us God's call to us as a church.

Those challenges came from internal and external to the church - choices people made, conflicts that arose, struggles with leadership, struggles between families, and spiritual attacks on our body.

We need to be on our guard against such instances of conflict and struggle, and attacks against our body of believers.

Therefore, we need to be vigilant - God tells us in his word that we are "to be sober-minded and watchful as the devil is prowling around seeking someone to devour."

We can never take the body here at SVBC for granted in the same way we can never take our families for granted - we must invest in our body and our families.

Before I go into the passage for this week, let me go back to last week's message. Pastor Tom spoke last week about Christ-like love, how Christ is love and that you can replace love with Jesus in the passages he spoke last week from 1 Corinthians 13:

"Jesus Christ is patient and kind; Jesus does not envy or boast; Jesus is not arrogant or rude. Jesus does not insist on his own way; Jesus is not irritable or resentful; Jesus does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Jesus bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Jesus never ends" 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7

I was very convicted by Pastor Tom's message. It was clear to me that I have much room to improve, I strive to live this Christ-like love, and there have been days when I have shown up well in Christ's strength and I believe reflected this Christ-like love.

There have been many times when I have been rude, short tempered, impatient, unkind - sometimes sharp with my kids, sometimes rude to Alana or holding onto some slight or wrong, angry towards people at work, or in the car, or here at church. Sometimes I fall into the trap of telling myself stories about why people are doing certain things and not striving to set aside the stories to discover the truth in love.

I have been resentful of people and I have certainly boasted about things - me and my "false righteousness".

The phrase that caught me the most was "morally superior". How many times have I lacked humility and showed up with a morally superior attitude. Many I am sure, and it is something that I caught and that I believe I need to watch for, and seek forgiveness.

So what, does that mean I am a failure and should be cast aside, or give up?

Thanks be to God for the grace and love of the Lord Jesus Christ - I am a growing, maturing work in progress.

I am justified by Christ - and by God's grace I have been provided a home in eternity with Christ and adopted as a son of God through Jesus' redeeming work on the cross.

He found me as I was, a sinner in need of a Saviour and he has walked alongside of me for almost 22 years patiently helping, encouraging, strengthening and forgiving me for all the sin and struggles and disobedience in my life.

I am being sanctified through this life, learning and growing up through love into Christ, maturing as a disciple of Christ, putting off childish ways as Pastor Tom spoke about last week.

What about you? What about us as a church?

Let's look at God's word, Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. As I understand it, Paul's letter to the Ephesians wasn't driven by some specific problem or issue they were having or conflict in the community - it was a letter encouraging the Ephesians and instructing them how to live with each other in unity, how to trust in Christ as the head or the body of believers. This can be very instructive for us as a church.

Please turn with me in your bibles as we look at Ephesians Chapter 4. I will begin with Ephesians 4:1-6:

1 I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

And jumping ahead to verses 11-16:

11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, 14 so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. 15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

I look at this passage and I am struck by three key things:

First, we are urged to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have in Christ - and we are told what that walk looks like - it is characterized by humility and gentleness, patience, and love.

Second, we are urged to be part of one body - in fact to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, and the bond of peace. To attain the unity of the faith and the knowledge of God.

Finally, we are to grow up together into Christ, to be built up - joined, and held together by Christ who is the head and from whom we are joined together such that we make the body grow up in love.

We are Christ's church - we are his body and each one of us a member of it, with different personalities, strengths, weaknesses and gifts. We are to bear with one another to strive to walk together in humility, gentleness, patience and love. We are to build each other up in the faith and knowledge of God. We are to strive for unity and to grow together into Christ, and through him to grow up in love.

Paul gives us more instruction on this in his other letters. Let's have a look at Colossians:

Please turn a few pages ahead to Colossians 2: 6 and 7:

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

And in verses 3:12-15

12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.

There is so much depth to the epistles and the teachings that are held in there for how we are to live together, how we are to treat each other.

As I reflected on this message and verses like those in Ephesians and Colossians, I have been struck by two things in our body:

One, we have people who have a heart for God - a desire to see him glorified, to see the gospel shared with others, to see people grow up in him, and to worship him - to reach out and exalt our Heavenly Father, and his Son Jesus Christ.

Two, we have a desire for a community of believers that care for each other and build each other up.

I believe that we have in these verses instruction on how to live these things out in our local body - applying our heart for God to building up our community into Jesus Christ.

These verses instruct us how to care for each other, encourage one another, work through conflict with one another, strive together in the midst of difficulty, show the love of Christ to each other.

Go back to Pastor Tom's message on love:

Love is patient - Paul reinforces that message in Ephesians and Colossians - it is a core aspect of how we are to walk. Are we patient with each other? Are we patient with our kids? Our spouses? Our pastors? Our neighbours? Our co-workers? Is your walk- is my walk characterized by patience?

Love is kind - Are we gentle with others? Tenderhearted? Are we compassionate? Are we gracious and forgiving in the midst of conflict? Are we prepared to forgive others when they have wronged us? Christ has been kind to us. Gracious to us; forgiving in the midst of our indifference and sin. He is slow to anger and abounding in love. Are we reflecting these aspects of Christ-like love in our walk?

Do we walk in humility? Do we bear with others in the body? Do we believe the best in people? Do we see Christ in them or do we see their imperfections, failures, faults and sins - their offenses against us or others?

I have an expression I use at work with my team - it is a little unorthodox because the word grace is not often used in society nowadays: **Trust with grace**

Trust that people are going to do their best, that they are going to seek to do the right thing - expect them to do the right thing.

And if they fail - or when I fail, be gracious to them, to me.

And if we or one of our brothers fail, we should be gracious to them.

Why, because we should trust that we are all going to strive to do the right thing as well, and we won't always get it correct. So let's show up in love - with compassion, meekness, kindness, tenderheartedness, patience, long suffering and forbearance.

If we are to build up the body together in Christ, we need to strive to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have in Christ; we need to walk in Christ-like love. We, all of us, need to strive for this.

We need to be sober-minded in this as we do it - we are all sinners. We are imperfect people incapable within our own strength to do this. We must rely on the leading and strength of the Holy Spirit.

However, we have a responsibility to be obedient to the word, to strive to live this way and to be prepared to account for our sins or our failings in these aspects of our walk. We need to be prepared to forgive each other - that requires being prepared to speak to one another when we have a complaint - speak to each other with grace, tenderness, respect, love.

Prayer - Help to grow in this area of our walk; to trust in Christ and to build one another up into Christ. Open our hearts to hear the flip side of how we are to walk - how we are not to walk, and what we are to put away.

As I noted earlier, and many of you have experienced in some aspect of your life, we struggle and we get hurt, or we unintentionally or in our frustration cause hurt.

It has happened in the past, and there is a reasonable chance it could happen in the future; however, we need to prepare ourselves and strive to walk in love and to build each other up into Christ, as he has called us to.

With that said, I think it is instructive to now look at the other aspect of what Paul shared with these other churches about how to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ's calling.

These next passages are a little tougher as they can cut at us and seem accusing - I am standing here as one of the body, as a leader called to be an example to the flock and, as Paul describes in Hebrews, as one who will have to give account for how I look out for your souls - called to humility and grace and to remove the log in my eye before pointing out the speck in the eye of my brother.

I bring this with a sincere love, and the humility to know that I have failed in some of these areas and will not be the first to pick up a stone and cast it at anyone who is weak in these areas - rather, I want to come alongside with tenderness, grace, compassion and love to build us up into Christ.

So let's go back a few verses in Colossians, verses 5 to 11:

5 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them

all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

And going back to Ephesians 4:17-32:

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. ²⁰ But that is not the way you learned Christ!— ²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires,²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

²⁵ Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. ²⁶ Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil. ²⁸ Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need. ²⁹ Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

I am a work in progress - a sinner who is working to put off my old way of life with my pride, lust, anger, callousness, deceitfulness. You also are imperfect sinners working to put on the new self, to grow up into Christ.

We need to come together and not give opportunity for the devil, that prowling lion to devour us, to create dissension, divisions, strife, impatience, discord, jealousy, sin-filled anger.

I am aware that there are people in this body, in every part of Christ's body - local churches everywhere - that have experienced the "old-self" impact. They have experienced sin-filled anger, bitterness, malice, wrath, slander.

They have spoken or had spoken to them harsh words. They have seen friends hurt from words not spoken in love or gentleness.

There are people in this body who hesitate to serve again because of how members of the body treated one another, and treated them.

There are harsh words and bitterness that are a barrier to healing within families.

There are relationships in jeopardy of failure because people are not willing to reach out to brothers and sisters against whom they have a complaint - or because we are not ready to receive our brother or sister who are seeking forgiveness. In some cases, we are carrying long accounts with one another and we need to work through those in love, tenderness and grace.

Again before I throw stones, or point out your speck - let me be clear that leaders are not immune - there are also people who have been hurt by leaders - either elders, deacons, ministry leaders, pastors - regrettably sometimes intentionally and at other times through frustration, often however without those leaders even knowing those people are hurt by their actions, or their responses.

All of these situations impede our ability to grow up together into Christ. All of these situations can result in a less effective body of Christ, a less effective body here at SVBC - people not building each other up in love, encouraging and exhorting each other to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord - doing this in a loving, tenderhearted and grace filled way.

The words of Peter in his first letter have been both an encouragement and a challenge to me recently:

5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, 7 casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

God calls us as leaders to be examples to the flock - he calls us to serve eagerly and willingly, not to domineer over the flock but to be examples to the flock. He calls all of us to humility towards one another.

So let me lead the way with humility and with all sincerity - forgive me. If I have wronged you personally, as a leader in this church - if you have been wronged by leaders in the past - forgive us.

If you feel that you cannot approach me because of actions by past leaders, or because some of us as leaders / I as a leader have failed to act, or acted in a way that hurt you or your family - forgive us and

come to us - talk to us.

We are imperfect people - God calls us to a very challenging role in the body - leadership is an incredible privilege but a significant burden.

The opportunity to teach and to speak into the lives of people, to develop and mentor them, to challenge and be challenged.

On the other hand we have to make decisions about what to prioritize, what to resource, how to address strife or conflict in the church, how to care for the broken and hurting, how to address challenges to theology, how to correct and rebuke. How to address concerns raised about what we as a church are focused on, what our vision is - when people disagree.

This over and above leading our families, fulfilling our daily jobs, having our own personal friendships and other community responsibilities.

In the midst of all of this God calls us as leaders to be examples - examples of what - how to walk in a manner worthy of the calling we have in Christ.

Be gracious to us, for we will strive to do our best and when (not if) we fall short, be gracious to us.

As I said we are all called to humility. You too have struggles, responsibilities, obligations. You too strive to walk in a manner pleasing to God - we need to be tender, kindhearted, long-suffering, humble, and gracious to you and all of us to each other.

I want to go one level deeper into a very real example of where we as a body can have a real impact in building each other into Christ - Worship.

We gather together every Sunday to enter into worship with the Lord.

We come to hear God's word opened to us by the Pastors or other speakers;

we have a chance to sing praises to our God and our Lord Jesus Christ;

we have a chance to connect with each other as a body - to teach kids from the word, to minister in the nursery, to fellowship with one another and encourage each other - to build each other up into Christ.

The challenge is we often show up here with the world bearing down on us from the week we just had.

Sometimes, some of us show up after having yelled at our kids to get ready, having had an argument with our spouses, running yellow lights to get here on time, putting on masks (I have personal experience with that one as I spoke about a couple years ago).

Sometimes we have our minds focused on what we are serving for lunch, or the report we need to finish for work, or the pain of an argument with a friend or colleague.

These things make it really hard to worship God, individually or corporately. And then we may show up having done little or no preparation to actually enter into the worship of God.

Instead of anticipating an encounter with God, we can easily slide into a more critical evaluation of the worship service. We may think things like “the music isn’t what we were expecting or what we prefer. - it is too loud, it is too quiet.

The service didn’t have songs I know, it didn’t connect with me. I couldn’t hear a certain instrument or singer, the slides didn’t advance fast enough and I couldn’t sing the song, the words in one of the songs are not all theologically sound, my neighbours kids are crying and I can’t concentrate...

Do you see how a worship service can be transformed from an opportunity to join together in worshipping God to an opportunity to pick at one another?

Certainly we need to be able to talk about worship but we need to do it with the spirit of the passages read earlier – humbly, kindly, carefully, lovingly with the purpose of building up.

Worship provides an opportunity for us to come together as a community and worship the Triune God. This is a central part of building each other up, of being built up into Christ - we are all here with an audience of one - God in three persons - Father, Spirit, Son.

He and he alone is worthy of our worship. When we focus on God, these other strifes and challenges, and the weaknesses we have that impede our ability to grow up into Christ can be put into a different perspective.

We can acknowledge our place before God and Jesus, and accept his love for us - letting it fill us and empower us to go out and show Christ-like love to others.

We have an incredible community here at SVBC - God has done and is doing an incredible work in the lives of his people in and through this church. We need to come before him and worship him as a body that is prepared to strive to grow together into Christ.

I want to invite all of us to continue to do that now.

I started the service in calling for you to lay your burdens down, explaining how we have intentionally built this service as a chance to simplify our worship and to focus on God, to take away the trappings and the things that may distract us - to focus on God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Rather than simply close with a single song, we are going to spend some more time in worship and prayer.

I want to encourage you - this is our time, your time to worship God.

You chose how to do that in the time we have left here this morning - sitting, standing; singing, listening, praying; hands raised or kneeling at the foot of his cross - there is no judgement here this morning.

This should be the safest place in the world - a place of love and caring, of tenderheartedness, kindness, grace, forgiveness.

Some of you may be struggling with challenges of the week, with sickness or burdens - lay them down, cast your anxieties on Jesus in this time of prayer and worship.

Some of you may be carrying burdens of relationships or hurt in the body - lay it down, ask God to guide you in the next steps along this journey of growing up into Christ and of building each other up into Christ.

Some of you may not know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour - turn to him, call out to him and accept him as your Lord and Saviour, as the Son of God who died on the cross and rose from the grave to save you from your sins, to prepare a place for you in eternity.

He loves you with an inexpressible love, and he wants you to come to him as you are - imperfect and in need of a Saviour. If he is calling you, talk to me, talk to one of the Elders, talk to a friend - don't let today go by without seeking Jesus - if you seek him, you will find him.

In the midst of all this, if you see a brother or sister in need or in prayer, lean-in and pray with them, or lift them up to the Lord silently as you are led.

Barrett is going to come up and lead us in worship - where we sing praises to God, pray to him, lift him up as the only one worthy of our worship. As our time of worship comes to an end I will close us off in prayer and a benediction but Barrett will keep playing quietly in the background.

As that happens, I want to encourage you to stay and continue worshipping or to gather together with others to pray and encourage one another in the Lord, or to go out and fellowship together as you are led.